UNITED NATIONS

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Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.4/1995/NGO/31
8 February 1995

Original: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Fifty-first session
Item 12 of the provisional agenda

QUESTION OF THE VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS IN ANY PART OF THE WORLD, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO COLONIAL AND OTHER DEPENDENT COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES

Written statement submitted by the Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[6 February 1995]

Persecution of Baha'is in the Islamic Republic of Iran

1. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights state that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. In its General Comment 22 on Article 18 of the Covenant (HRI/GEN/1/Rev.1), the Human Rights Committee points out that "The terms 'belief' and 'religion' are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions".

2. The Baha'is in Iran are, therefore, entitled to practise their religion whether or not those in power approve of its teachings. However, as representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran have repeatedly placed in the public record false and misleading statements about the Baha'i faith, its origins and principles - the latest being in the response to the Special Representative on Iran (included in document E/CN.4/1994/50) and in the statement of the Iranian Delegation to the fiftieth session of the Commission on Human Rights (9 March 1994) - the Baha'i International Community feels compelled to respond to these accusations.

3. The Baha'i International Community is an international non-governmental organization. It represents the worldwide membership of the Baha'i faith - more than 5 million people in over 200 countries and dependent territories. Its communities include people of almost every nationality, religious background, profession, and economic class, and from more than 2,000 ethnic and tribal groups. When the representatives of Iran falsely characterize the Baha'i faith, its founder or its principles, they slander a diverse and world-embracing community, a community concerned with the development and well-being of the whole human race, a community striving to foster peaceful, cooperative, inter-racial and inter-religious cooperation around the globe.

I. HISTORY OF THE PERSECUTIONS OF THE BAHA'IS IN IRAN

4. The current situation of Baha'is in the Islamic Republic of Iran can best be understood in the context of more than a century of persecution. Because of its progressive social and religious teachings, the Baha'i faith has been vigorously opposed in Iran since its inception in the mid-1800s. Clergy and secular authorities collaborated in the suppression of the faith, killing some 20,000 of the early followers by the end of the nineteenth century. Persecutions of Baha'is have erupted intermittently during the twentieth century, coinciding most often with a need by the Government to shore up its support among certain segments of the Islamic clergy.

5. At times outbreaks of violence against Baha'is have been isolated, incited by local or regional authorities. At other times, as is now the case, oppression of Baha'is has been systematic and sustained as national policy.

II. ALLEGATION OF BEING A POLITICAL CULT ARTIFICIALLY INVENTED BY COLONIAL POWERS

6. The outlandish charge that the Iranian Baha'i community is the product of "the direct machinations of the then dominant colonial powers in Iran, Czarist Russia and Great Britain" has no basis in fact and cannot be connected with historical events. Furthermore, Baha'is are prohibited by their faith from becoming involved in partisan or subversive political activity.

7. In 1844 a young Persian merchant, known as the Báb, announced in Shiraz that He was the bearer of a new revelation from God. His primary mission, the Báb said, was to prepare humanity for the advent of the universal divine Messenger anticipated in the scriptures of all the major religions. The teachings of the Báb were embraced by thousands, called Bábís, in His native land. Seen as a threat to the power of both secular and religious authorities, the Báb was executed in 1850 on orders from the Persian monarch, Nasri'd-Din-Shah.

8. Among the followers of the Báb was an Iranian nobleman who announced in 1863 that He was the Messenger the Báb had heralded. With that announcement, Bahá'u'lláh brought to an end the Bábí dispensation and founded the Baha'i faith. His followers are called Baha'is.

9. The claim that the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are new Messengers of God is viewed by many Muslims as heresy. In the Qur'an, Muhammad is referred to as the "Seal of the Prophets", and most Muslim scholars interpret this to mean

that He would be the last Messenger of God. In the Baha'i view, Muhammad did, indeed, end or "seal" the prophetic cycle, and the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh inaugurated a new religious cycle.

10. Certain Baha'i teachings are considered particularly challenging to the traditions of Islam. These teachings include the equality of men and women and the essential harmony between science and religious revelation.

11. The people of Iran have been kept almost universally ignorant of the nature, teachings, and history of the Baha'i faith. Access to any means of mass communication has been consistently denied the Iranian Baha'i community. Baha'is have even been prohibited from distributing literature and from holding public lectures. In fact, ignorance of the true character of the religion has been systematically cultivated by the ecclesiastic authorities into a full-blown and deeply ingrained prejudice. It is within this context that the Iranian Government's fabrications and distortions about the history and teachings of the Baha'i faith can be best understood.

III. ALLEGATIONS THAT THE FOUNDER OF THE BAHA'I FAITH CLAIMED TO BE GOD AND CALLED FOR THE SPILLING OF BLOOD

12. Representatives of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran have attributed to the founder of the Baha'i faith the claim to be God and a call for the spilling of the blood of all those who fail to follow His commands.

13. The allegation that the founder of the Baha'i faith represented Himself to be God incarnate has no basis in historical fact or in the writings of either the Báb or Bahá'u'lláh. In words that are in full harmony with the Báb's writings on the subject, Bahá'u'lláh explains clearly and repeatedly the distinction between the forever unknowable divinity that rules existence and the Messengers whom He sends for the guidance of mankind, as well as the relationship between the two.

14. The assertion attributed to the Báb, in which he was supposed to have said that "all those who fail to follow his command, their blood must be spilled" is a gross misrepresentation of both the Bábí and the Baha'i teachings. What is presented as a quotation appears to be a disjointed assemblage of phrases taken from different passages and embellished to suit the purposes of the author. It is a well-documented fact that the Babís were ruthlessly attacked by elements hostile to their beliefs and that they fought back in defence of themselves.

15. A significant point of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings is His instruction: "Shed not the blood of anyone, O people, neither judge ye anyone unjustly". The extent of the application of this instruction is reflected in His statement that, "Although in recent years a number of the faithful have, in most of the cities of Persia, suffered themselves to be killed rather than kill, yet the hatred smouldering in certain hearts hath blazed more fiercely than before". The proof of this observation remains current some 100 years later in the hostilities to which the Baha'is have been subjected in the wake of the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

IV. THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BAHA'I CEMETERY IN TEHRAN

16. Amid the countless desecrations of Baha'i shrines and Baha'i cemeteries that have blackened Iran's reputation over the past 14 years, the most recent incident to arouse indignation in capitals around the world is the destruction of the principal Baha'i cemetery in Tehran. Without warning, thousands of graves were dug up and the remains unceremoniously shovelled into dump trucks and carted away to an unknown destination, so that an "Islamic Cultural Centre" could be erected on the confiscated land.

17. In response to the communication of the Special Representative, the Iranian Government has misrepresented all the central facts of the situation, claiming that "this project has removed only 20 centimetres of the soil of the Baha'i cemetery covering those graves whose period of 30 years has already elapsed", adding that "new graves have not been touched", and that "the municipality projects are not limited to this case and in some parts of the city cover the old Muslim cemeteries as well".

18. The destruction of the cemetery is, in fact, the final stage in a 10-year-long process of desecration of the property. Shortly after the revolution, the new regime confiscated the area, following which a large portion was wantonly destroyed and the more valuable marble monuments sold by the authorities at public auction. In direct contradiction of the Iranian claims that the 30 years' limitation period had expired, or, as can be found in another response by the Iranian Government, that the cemetery had been "abandoned since 1978" and "since that year nobody has been buried there", new graves were dug even during the months following the revolution. Whatever actions the authorities may or may not have taken with respect to unused burial places belonging to other religious communities, only the Baha'i cemetery has been singled out for this abuse. Excavations over 3 metres deep have been made in order to lay the foundations of the Islamic Centre being erected on the despoiled property.

V. BAHA'IS PERSECUTED SOLELY FOR THEIR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

19. The assertion by the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran that Baha'is as individuals are "certainly entitled to freedom of conscience and personal belief" and that "they do enjoy constitutional guarantees under the law of the land" is untenable. Charges brought against the members of the Baha'i faith in Iran have been almost invariably religious in nature: they have been called "enemies of God", "corrupt on Earth", "members of a perverse sect". Baha'is facing execution have routinely been offered their lives if they would recant their faith and convert to Islam. The same offer has been made to those deprived of liberty, livelihood, property and educational opportunities.

20. The Iranian Government, however, continues to justify its religious persecution by levelling a variety of false charges against Baha'is without producing a shred of evidence to support any of these accusations. That it has in its possession the archives and files seized from the national Baha'i offices in Tehran in 1978 and has, nevertheless, failed to bring forward any tangible evidence of espionage, underscores the hollowness of its allegations.